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Supplement to *British Book News*

# GEORGE ELIOT

*By* LETTICE COOPER

PUBLISHED FOR
THE BRITISH COUNCIL
and the NATIONAL BOOK LEAGUE
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Lettice Cooper is a distinguished novelist and critic with a special interest in the English and European novel of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and in the American novel and short story. She is the author of *Robert Louis Stevenson* in the 'English Novelists' Series. She delivered the Centenary Lecture on Edgar Allan Poe at the English Commemoration. The best known of her novels, several of which have been translated into various European languages, are probably *The New House* and *National Provincial*. Both of these are pictures of life in an English provincial town, with its many cross-currents: religious, political, social, industrial. Her wide knowledge of these and deep interest in them make her particularly able to appreciate the novels of George Eliot.

*Bibliographical Series*
*of Supplements to* 'British Book News'

*

GENERAL EDITOR
T. O. Beachcroft

'GEORGE ELIOT'
*pencil sketch of Mary Ann Cross ('George Eliot') dated 1877, by* LADY ALMA-TADEMA, *in the National Portrait Gallery*

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AUG 6 1956

¶ George Eliot was born at Nuneaton, Warwickshire, on 22 November 1819. She died in London on 22 December 1880.

# GEORGE ELIOT

## PART I. MARY ANN EVANS

In the midlands of England, between the manufacturing towns of Coventry and Nuneaton, lies a stretch of level country, undramatic, without mountain or river. The soil is rich, it is farmers' country, but even in the first half of the nineteenth century, when one coach a day linked Coventry with Nuneaton, it was partly industrial. The manor house looked across the green plain to the colliery tip, the villager, who wove cloth on the handloom in his cottage, carried it to be finished at the neighbouring mill. But it was mostly rural with Shakespeare's birthplace only a few miles away, a countryside of red brick farms, of cowslips and cuckoos, of wide skies reflected in canal waters. In this country, in 1819, Mary Ann, or Marian, Evans, later to be George Eliot, was born.

Her father, Robert Evans, Welsh by descent, was the son of a builder and carpenter. He started his working life as a farmer, but later became agent for the estate of Arbury, the property of a Warwickshire landowner. Evans was a man known and respected throughout the county, both for his upright character, and for his wide knowledge of the whole fabric of country life. He could give sound advice about house or farm buildings, about timber, mining, soil, land valuation, stock, or crops. He was traditional in his opinions, a life-long supporter of the Church of England and of the Tory party. Mary Ann was his youngest child, the third child of his second marriage to the daughter of a yeoman farmer. When Mary Ann was born, the two children of the first marriage were nearly grown up, and soon moved out into the world. Her parents, her sister, Christiana, and her brother, Isaac, made up her home.

The youngest child in such a family sometimes feels anxiously that there is no one left for her. Father and mother have each other, brother and sister are already allies. The passionate longing for someone of her own, someone

to put her first, was to run all through George Eliot's life, and it was not until she found it in George Henry Lewes that her genius was to flower. The child, Mary Ann, craved above all for the whole love of her brother, Isaac. Naturally she was disappointed, for Isaac at eight years old went to school, returning only for the holidays from the world of boys and men to pet and patronize the little sister, with whom he was often impatient. She could not walk far enough nor climb high enough, she cried too easily, and her devouring affection set up the inevitable resistance. There was plenty of kindness in the family for Mary Ann, her father was especially fond of her, but there was no one to be hers alone. The high-powered child in the household of ordinary people suffered the disproportionate agonies of her kind.

There were minor troubles. Mary Ann was plain and untidy ; her sister, Chrissey, was pretty and neat. Chrissey was the favourite with the grown-up people, a good girl, useful in the house, and approved by their mother, while Mary Ann was often in disgrace for slouching over a book instead of helping, and for her unmanageable mane of hair. Not that she was always unhappy. It was a good life for a child in the red brick house at Griff, with its farm buildings, garden, and pond, and with the freedom of wood and field all round. Her father often took her with him as he drove about the Arbury estate. Standing between his knees in farm or cottage as he sat and discussed the tenants' problems, Mary Ann absorbed a great deal about country people and their lives. Those years of childhood, she said in one of her unremarkable poems, were 'seed to all my good', and she speaks of 'blest hours of infantine content'. She was, in fact, like most children, sometimes unhappy and sometimes happy, but both with more intensity than most children because she was a woman on a grand scale in the making.

Mrs. Evans was delicate, and to relieve her the two girls were sent early away to school, first to a small school at Attleboro, where Mary Ann suffered from the cold and

from night terrors ; next to a larger school at Nuneaton. Miss Lewis, the first mistress here, became Mary Ann's great friend, and later, it was to her that the girl wrote those ponderous, priggish, pathetic letters that were her chief outlet between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five. Miss Lewis was caught up in the full tide of the Evangelical Movement, which in its later stages was to break away from the Established Church of England into Nonconformity, but in its early stages was a movement within the Established Church, and did much to reanimate a more personal and vital faith. Mary Ann, in adolescence, was strongly influenced by Miss Lewis. Her temperament was deeply religious and goodness was always to be her predominant interest in life. When Mary Ann was fifteen, her mother died, and soon afterwards Chrissey married. Mary Ann left school and took charge of the house and of her father and brother. She also visited the poor, and did her share of work at the Clothing Clubs and other charities of the neighbourhood. The solemn sixteen-year-old went gravely through these boring duties with the older women, secretly panting for a richer life, and for a chance to use the full powers of which she was conscious. 'You may try, but you cannot imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you, yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl.'

Some life of her own she did have. She took lessons in Italian, German, and music. She read as always, greedily, but there was no one to whom she could talk about books and ideas. Miss Lewis by post was her nearest approach to congenial company. Her deep-rooted sense of duty and the strong Puritanism which in early life exalted the value of self sacrifice prevented Mary Ann from contemplating any change. Her father lived at Griff, and it was her duty to look after her father. No doubt there were many afternoons when she walked alone by the canal, and saw her life as an interminable round of duty and self sacrifice. Years afterwards, when asked if she would ever write her autobiography, she said of that time : 'The only thing that I

should care to dwell on would be the absolute despair I suffered of ever being able to achieve anything.' At this time in her life she was not even able to enjoy an occasional holiday, for when at nineteen she paid a first visit to London with her brother, Isaac, she refused to go to a theatre, and wrote austerely to Miss Lewis. 'I was not at all delighted with the stir of the Great Babel.' Miss Lewis's Evangelicism had done its work! Just before her nineteenth birthday, Marian wrote, 'May I seek to be sanctified wholly!' A provincial young prig? Yes, but a chrysalis, in whom life and colour and winged power were the more closely folded because the colours were unusually bright and the wings strong. They were soon to begin breaking their sheath.

To a great many artists who have struggled out of a society indifferent to the arts, the first congenial friendship has been the opening of the new world. When Mary Ann was twenty-two, Isaac married, and took over from his father both the agency for the Arbury estate and the agent's house at Griff. Robert Evans and Mary Ann moved to a semi-detached house in Foleshill Road, Coventry. Coventry was then a small town, but it was the country girl's first entry into the great world. Here for the first time she made friends who shared her own interests, Charles Bray, whose book, *The Philosophy of Necessity* was published in that year; his wife, Sara, formerly Sara Hennell, whose brother Charles had written an *Inquiry Concerning the Origin of Christianity* which Mary Ann had already read. It must have been delightful to the bookish girl to meet authors in the flesh, to go for the first time to a house where free discussion of abstract ideas was the natural climate. To the new friends Mary Ann seemed a gentle, modest girl who surprised them by the wide range of her reading and by everything that distinguished her from the more commonplace young women of the neighbourhood. She was not pretty. Her head was large, her face heavy, she had no self-confidence, believing herself to be plainer than she really was, for her

eyes were beautiful, and there was great sweetness in her voice and smile. She had no surface charm and was not easy to know, but there was a warmth and sincerity in her that made her lovable to anyone who could break the barrier of diffidence.

The evangelical Miss Lewis must have felt that she was losing her hold on her pupil, who had been questioning the tenets of orthodox religion for some time, even before she met the Brays. Stimulated by the constant discussion in their house, and encouraged by their moral support, she dramatically and solemnly renounced her faith. It was a shattering blow to her father, who even threatened to sell the house, and to go and live with his married daughter. Mary Ann accepted the challenge. She would take lodgings in Coventry and earn her living by teaching. She went away for a few weeks. Common sense and the discovery that he was very uncomfortable without her prevailed with Robert Evans. He agreed to receive her again and she compromised by accompanying him to church on Sundays. She remained with him until he died, when she was thirty years old.

During this time she achieved her first piece of writing apart from her voluminous, and, it must be admitted, tedious letters. She translated Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu*. It took her two years and often bored her, but probably it helped to form the habit of sticking to a long piece of work which is so necessary for the writer of even the most inspired novel. This was a miserable time in her life, only relieved by her friendship with the Brays and Hennells. Her father, in his failing health often could not bear to be left alone for an hour. Her own health suffered from the confined life, and from the day-long frustration of her urgent spirit, which had not yet found its proper channels. She loved her father deeply, and his feebleness and approaching death tore her heart. 'What shall I be without my father? It will seem as if a part of my moral nature was gone!' Clearly if she was to develop her full powers a

part of her moral nature needed to go, and her friends must have been relieved for her when after his long illness Robert Evans died. The Brays were just going abroad for a holiday. They took Mary Ann with them, and left her in a *pension* at Geneva, where she spent a peaceful eight months, a time for readjustment and rest.

When she came back to England, she met at the Brays' house John Chapman, who had just become editor of the *Westminster Review*. He gave her some books to review. A little later on, he bought the paper, and offered her the post of honorary assistant editor. She was to be paid for her contributions, and she had a small income of her own. She came up to London, lodged with the Chapmans, and settled in to work on the paper.

The work delighted her but there was soon trouble at home. Chapman's wife grew jealous of her. His relationship with Mary Ann, although they were never lovers, was warm, based on shared interests, and touched with enough feeling to make it extremely stimulating to both of them. Chapman was at that time having an affair with the children's governess, a pretty, silly girl, who also lived in the house, and whom Mrs. Chapman seems to have tolerated. Wife and mistress combined to drive out Mary Ann. Indignant, she returned to Coventry, and the *Westminster Review* immediately fell into disorder without her energy and ability. Chapman went after her, and persuaded his wife and mistress to agree that she should come back. Surprisingly she came. She had already travelled a long way from the evangelical girl at Griff. She lived two years in Chapman's house, and in the constant stir of work and interesting society, the three women managed somehow to live together in comparative peace while Chapman no doubt enjoyed the best of all three worlds.

Mary Ann was now in the full tide of London literary life. She met Dickens and Froude and Huxley, Harriet Martineau, Grote, and J. S. Mill. She became a great friend of the philosopher, Herbert Spencer. He was near her own

age, handsome and distinguished, sharing all her interests. It was one of those friendships that everybody expected to ripen into marriage, but this never happened. Spencer had theories about marriage, he thought the legal bond between two people incompatible with perfect happiness. Probably he was rationalizing a deep-rooted fear, but his views may have influenced Mary Ann and prepared the way for her union with George Lewes. Spencer's influence was very important in another way, for it was he who first suggested to her that she might try her hand at fiction.

Herbert Spencer introduced Lewes to Mary Ann. Lewes was at that time editing the *Leader*, the first critical weekly to appear in England. He was an ugly, lively, genial, amusing, warm-hearted man, a very high-class journalist, who did not hesitate to tackle any subject, and had something stimulating if not profound to say about most of them. He was a brilliant editor, the kind of man who promotes good work in other people. He was unhappily married; his young wife had been seduced by Thornton Hunt, son of Leigh Hunt. Thornton Hunt was the father of two of the children who bore the name of Lewes. Under the law as it then stood, Lewes could not get a divorce. He made his wife and children an allowance and lived apart from her.

Mary Ann and Lewes fell deeply in love, and she had to make a choice on which her whole life was to depend. Her father's strict piety, her mother's yeoman pride, her country and small town respectability, even her friends at Coventry who a few years ago had seemed so daring, were on the side of self denial, and she had grown up with self denial as a religion. All her past was against an illegal union with Lewes, but life and love and the future were on his side. She agreed to live with him as his unmarried wife. In the summer of 1854, they went abroad together for what was in all but name a honeymoon.

It was not as she would have chosen it to be. She was sensitive to the good opinion of her friends and family; she had qualms then and afterwards. But at last she had a full

emotional life, someone who needed her as she needed him, someone with whom she came first. Lewes's love and admiration were a continual reassurance against her diffidence. She was no longer lonely. From the fulfilment of her nature came the release of her pen. Mary Ann, who would have preferred to be Mary Ann Lewes, was still Mary Ann Evans, but she was to have a new name which was to obliterate both. Soon after they returned to England, she began her career as a novelist under the pen name of George Eliot.

## PART II. GEORGE ELIOT

### *Scenes of Clerical Life*

Mary Ann and George Lewes settled down in a small house at Richmond. It was necessary for both to go on working, there were Lewes's wife and children to provide for as well as themselves. Mary Ann had often dreamed of writing a novel. Now, under the stimulus of happy love and of discriminating encouragement the idea came to birth. She began with a long-short story, *Amos Barton*, which appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine* under the pen name of George Eliot, chosen because George was the name of her beloved, and she liked the sound of Eliot. Blackwood's also published the two stories which followed, *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story*, and *Janet's Repentance*. The three of them appeared together, in 1858, in book form under the title of *Scenes of Clerical Life*. Even while the stories were appearing separately, they arrested attention, and were at once recognized, among others by Dickens and Thackeray, as the work of a new writer of importance.

It was the hey-day of Victorian fiction. Thackeray's *The Virginians* was running in serial form, as well as Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, and *A Tale of Two Cities* was to appear in 1859. It was ten years since the publication of *Wuthering Heights*,

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* had appeared in 1853, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, all were novelists of heightened tone and colour. By comparison with them George Eliot was sober, rooted in everyday life. She used for her three scenes the three backgrounds of her youth and childhood, the country parish with its village and surrounding farms; the great country house which she knew so well from her father's long connexion with Arbury; the country town like Coventry, which served her as a setting for the clash between the new Evangelical Movement in the Church and the traditional religion.

George Eliot came late to her vocation. She was thirty-eight when she wrote *Scenes of Clerical Life*, and the substance of nearly all her novels was to be memory, worked upon by her creative imagination. She always turned back for her material to the scenes of her first thirty years, and except for some parts of her last novel, *Daniel Deronda*, she wrote almost always about provincial life.

Her memory for the speech of the countryside was particularly acute. Amos Barton, struggling to keep wife and children on a miserably inadequate income, is presented to the reader by village gossip. The village sees that the simple, stupid man is deluded by the pinchbeck charms of the 'Countess', and that her stay at the Vicarage is an imposition which is going to prove the last straw to Milly Barton, worn out by her exertions and pregnant with yet another child. The village recognizes and exaggerates the spark of romantic feeling for the Countess which appears to Amos himself to be no more than good will towards a friend in trouble. Both the hard judgement of the Vicar's deluded innocence and the practical kindness when Milly is on her death-bed are the very essence of village life.

Milly herself is the first of George Eliot's notable women. Indeed the central figure in each scene of *Clerical Life* is a woman. Mr. Gilfil is only there to tell the story, and presumably is a clergyman to provide the link with the other two tales. Any honest young lover and mourning

husband would have done as well. It is Caterina's story. Caterina, the Italian born adopted child of the great house, is the young Mary Ann Evans, the girl whose intensity of feeling could find no adequate response in the more phlegmatic people round her. Caterina is separated from her surroundings by not being English, as Mary Ann had felt herself isolated by a greater capacity for passion and suffering.

*Amos Barton*, and *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story*, although fairly long, are real short stories, given unity by one theme. *Janet's Repentance* shows that already George Eliot is moving towards the form of the novel, for it is made up of two interweaving strands. Janet's miserable relationship with her husband, the deterioration of her character under the strain, and her redemption through the influence of the good, evangelical clergyman, Mr. Tryan is the main theme, but Mr. Tryan's struggle against the ill will and suspicion of the conservative townspeople is also important. The Evangelical movement, the clash between the old and new ways of ministry and worship in the Church had always interested George Eliot. She had remarked in one of her earlier letters that it was a pity that English novelists neglected this subject which lay ready to their hand, and she continued to be interested in it long after she herself had abandoned any form of worship. Her admiration for the saintly characters that the movement produced colours especially her early novels, and Miss Lewis, even if she mourned for the pupil who had slipped away from her, must, if she was worldly enough to read novels at all, have realized that she had left her mark. Indeed it was so deep a mark that George Eliot could never handle her good evangelicals quite dispassionately. Mr. Tryan, as later in *Adam Bede* Dinah Morris, seems a little too good to be true. He is even a trifle mawkish, and the sentimentality with which George Eliot handles him is the weakness of *Janet's Repentance*.

Its strength, as in the other two stories, is in the woman, in Janet herself. She is one of those women of great possibilities only partly realized, whom George Eliot was to

develop in her later novels. Janet, brutally treated by her husband, drinks to escape from her sorrows. Such a heroine was a new departure in fiction. It is impossible to imagine Dickens or Thackeray allowing one of their good young women even to think of such a failing. Their good women were good and their bad women were bad, but George Eliot was already emerging from this tradition. 'If', she wrote, 'the ethics of art do not permit the truthful presentation of a character essentially noble, yet liable to great error that is anguish to its own nobleness, then it seems to me that the ethics of art are too narrow.' For her, and through her for the novel, they were already widening. Caterina who could contemplate murder, Janet who could take refuge from her sorrows in drunkenness, belong to the modern novel, which, it has lately been recognized, owes so much to George Eliot.

Henry James remarked that for George Eliot the novel was 'not primarily a picture of life but a moralized fable'. It is true that the problem of goodness, of how far people manage to live up to the best that is in them, gives an underlying urgency to all her work. But the picture of life is also there and emerges in these stories in a hundred touches of insight and descriptive power, even though parts of the stories are sentimentalized. It was clear to the readers of *Blackwood's* that here was a new author of great gifts. 'It is a long time', Blackwood wrote to his unknown contributor, 'since I have read anything so fresh, so humorous, so touching.' Always diffident, George Eliot throve on encouragement. Her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede*, appeared in 1859, only a year after *Scenes of Clerical Life* was published in book form.

*Adam Bede*

Dickens was one of the first to recognize that the new novelist was a woman, and by the time that *Adam Bede* was published, the authorship was no longer a secret, although George Eliot continued to write under her pen name. The

germ of *Adam Bede* was a story that she once heard from a Methodist aunt who had accompanied a condemned girl to the place of her execution. From this sprang the idea of Hetty Sorrel, condemned to death for the murder of her illegitimate child, and of Dinah Morris, the Methodist preacher who comforted Hetty in prison and went with her on her way to the scaffold. As in *Janet's Repentance*, George Eliot still sees Evangelicism through the haze of her adolescent romance, and Dinah Morris, like Mr. Tryan, is an idealized character, completely flawless. She is less irritating than Mr. Tryan because, as with all her good women, George Eliot is very successful in giving an impression of real sweetness. Dinah is someone whom it is impossible wholly to accept, but also impossible to dislike. She may have been half unconsciously modelled on Miss Lewis, but probably she had in her a good deal of the quality of her author.

The seed of the plot fell into rich soil. George Eliot told her publishers that her first full-length novel would be ' full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay '. The real substance of *Adam Bede* is all the country background of her youth. The Poysers' farm is in the centre of the canvas, presided over by Mrs. Poyser, a figure whose earthy and homely reality makes Dinah Morris appear thin. Mrs. Poyser was probably Mary Ann's own mother, the daughter of a yeoman farmer, fragile of body, intrepid of spirit, with her shrewd tongue and her kind heart. Adam Bede himself derives from Mary Ann's father, Robert Evans, the upright workman, self respecting and generally respected for character and capacity. Adam suffers a little, like Dinah, from excess of virtue. The reader turns with some relief to the imperfect characters, to the pretty, vain childish Hetty, and to her seducer, the Squire's son, Arthur Donnithorne, who is not a deliberate villain, but a spoiled young man brought up to expect things to go easily for him, and appalled at the result of his pleasant dalliance.

The weakness of the book, beside the oppressive virtue of

Adam and Dinah, is, as with so many Victorian novels, the sacrifice of probability to plot and the tidiness of the ending. George Eliot was moving towards a new kind of novel in which representation of life was to be more important than the resolution of a plot, but she was still partly bound by the old convention. Hetty's pardon, so dramatically and improbably brought to the place of execution by Arthur Donnithorne, is an artificial device to spare the reader. In the relationship between Hetty and Arthur and in all that grows out of it, there is a sense of destiny which is falsified by this resolution. Again while Adam's love for Hetty is utterly convincing, and the thing that brings him most to life as a human being, his final marriage to Dinah, has none of that inevitability, but seems like a mechanical device to round off the story.

But these are the flaws in a rich tapestry of rural life of the time, the farm, the cottage, the workshop, the Rectory, the great house. It is a picture of a society based on the land, a society still stable, a hierarchy in which each order has its own rights. The scene in which Mrs. Poyser routs the old Squire, who has come to propose a deal in farm property which would be unfair to them, has all the sturdy quality of an English folk song.

> You may run away from my words, sir, and you may go spinnin' underhand ways o' doing us a mischief—for you've got Old Harry to your friend, though nobody else is—but I tell you for once as we're not dumb creatures to be abused and made money on by them as ha' got the lash i' their hands for want o' knowing how to undo the tackle. An' if I'm the only one who speaks my mind, there's plenty o' the same way of thinking i' this parish and the next to 't ; for your name's no better than a brimstone match in everybody's nose—if it isna two—three old folks as you think o' saving your soul by giving 'em a bit o' flannel and a drop o' porridge. An' you may be right i' thinking it'll take but little to save your soul, for it'll be the smallest savin' y' ever made wi' all your scrapin' !

Such was the speech—witty, pungent, and coloured with

homely images—that George Eliot heard in her childhood, and that was a great part of her training as a writer.

### *The Mill on the Floss*

The life that Marian and George Lewes led together, at first in the house at Richmond, later in London in a house near Regent's Park, was one, as he recorded in his diary, of 'deep wedded happiness'. The stepsons were devoted to Marian, and she to them. Both Marian and Lewes worked hard and were always interested in each other's work, although inevitably, as her books appeared and her reputation soared, hers became the first consideration. Lewes was born to be an unselfish Prince Consort. Marian found in him the heart-whole devotion that she had always yearned for. He cherished her, cheered her melancholy, encouraged her diffidence, spared her the practical difficulties of life, entertained the people who came to their house, leaving Marian free for the only kind of social pleasure she liked, serious conversation with one or at most a few real friends. He even kept from her the few unfavourable reviews of her novels. It seems strange that a woman of her fibre should have allowed such a thing to happen, but she was abnormally sensitive and prone to melancholy and self distrust. Except for these dark moods, and for bad headaches and other minor ailments which often troubled her, and except for a certain amount of anxiety about Lewes's never robust health, their life was extremely happy. George Eliot's career moved steadily from success to success as her great talent expanded. There is little to tell of the life that ran so smoothly, and George Eliot's history is the history of her novels from the time that she joined George Lewes up to his death.

Her second long novel, *The Mill on the Floss*, was published only a year after *Adam Bede*. It was the book in which she drew most directly on her own early life. Maggie Tulliver, the sensitive, passionate child in a stolid family, craving for her brother's love, the ardent girl growing up in

a narrow world with a thirst for life, beauty, knowledge, is the young Mary Ann Evans herself, transmuted into fiction. Maggie repeats her author's childish troubles for she is often in disgrace, considered plain and tiresome, compared unfavourably with her pretty, docile cousin, Lucy, as Mary Ann had been with Chrissey. With Maggie as with her creator the strongest need is the need of being loved, the second the need of more scope than her surroundings provide. Somewhere in herself she feels possibilities that might be realized in a world of less rigid conventions and narrow judgements, she knows instinctively that there must be somewhere a world of different values in which her qualities would not be despised, and when she runs away to the gypsies, it is in the hope of finding such a world, less cramping to the fullness of her own instinctive life.

With her adoration of her brother, Tom, and her sense of inferiority as a mere girl who can only share his amusements on sufferance, there is also a feeling of superiority, for Maggie is quicker than the stupid Tom and knows it, even while she reveres him for the things which she cannot do and craves for his approval. It is to win his approval as well as in a passion of adolescent masochism that she gives up the stolen meetings with Philip Wakem that are the only break in her restricted life. Later, when Maggie is spending a holiday with Lucy and half unconsciously steals the love of her recognized admirer, Stephen Guest, the worst of her punishment for the abortive elopement is Tom's anger. The climax of the book is the reconciliation between brother and sister at the moment of death, when both are swept down together by a mass of wreckage in the flooded river. It does not make any difference that Tom is stupid, self righteous, and uncomprehending. He remains to the end the pivot of Maggie's world, exercising that power over her which the lesser but more fully integrated personality so often wields over the character with so much greater potentialities, but still disorganized.

*The Mill on the Floss* has both the strength and the

weakness of an autobiographical novel. There is no more vivid picture in English fiction of the sorrows and sufferings of a child. The world of those early chapters is the world as seen through the eyes of a child. George Eliot used, of course, with some adaptation, the surroundings of her own home, and visitors to the house at Griff can still see the mill, and the Red Deeps where Maggie had the stolen interviews with Philip. By the time that George Eliot wrote *The Mill on the Floss*, she had abandoned her girlish belief that happiness was wrong, and renunciation good for its own sake. Her very life as a writer had depended on her being able to abandon it, but in her portrait of the young Maggie, she allows no mature nor objective judgement to qualify the identification. The portrait gains in freshness and intensity what it loses in proportion.

The second half of *The Mill on the Floss* is less closely autobiographical, and much weaker. Stephen Guest has often been criticized as unworthy of Maggie and unlikely to attract her love. Certainly he is only seen from outside, and is a local dandy, a vain, complacent, trivial young man. But Maggie, like so many people with greater powers of feeling, is slow in coming to emotional maturity. She has led a starved life teaching in a girls' school. Stephen is young, gay, and handsome. George Eliot does convey, although it was not possible for a novelist in Victorian England to say it, that what sprang up between them was sexual feeling. Maggie, like her creator, is avid for love. Less fortunate than her creator, she moves in a world where there is no one of her own calibre. She loves the most attractive man she knows, as soon as he breaks down her resistance by showing a preference for her. A novelist writing to-day would probably be aware that there must have been some satisfaction as well as other feelings in taking Stephen from Lucy, the girl who had been held up to her as a model in her childhood as Chrissey had to Mary Ann. George Eliot's high-mindedness and the comparative innocence of her period leaves these undercurrents unexplored.

Maggie is all remorse about Lucy, Lucy all gentle forgiveness. Lucy is an idealized portrait, but as with Dinah Morris, George Eliot succeeds in giving to what might have been simply an intolerable prig a sweetness that makes her bearable.

*The Mill on the Floss* does not depend only on Maggie and her story. It has a superb setting of English family life, narrated as always by George Eliot with humour and shrewd observation. Mrs. Tulliver is a woman in herself of little personality, but as the representative of the Dodson family, she has an authority which the more lively Mr. Tulliver resents but cannot always resist. Aunt Glegg is the embodiment of these always-right Dodsons. Bullying her husband and her sisters, exacting the full measure of respect due to her from younger relatives, touchy, arrogant, quick tempered, she refuses to receive Mr. Tulliver when he offends her, but is resolute in leaving her will unaltered, for people must not be able to say after she is dead that she did not do right by her sister's children. She is the harshest critic of Maggie as she grows up, but when Maggie is disgraced in the eyes of their world, it is Aunt Glegg who offers her a home. Not that she needs to, for in this crisis the flabby, poor-spirited Mrs. Tulliver stands by her child. The central religion of the Dodson family is that blood is thicker than water. The Dodsons are the very marrow of English middle class of the last century, a tradition that still survives.

> A Dodson would not be taxed with the omission of anything that was becoming, or that belonged to the eternal fitness of things, which was plainly indicated in the practice of the most substantial parishioners and in the family tradition—such as obedience to parents, faithfulness to kindred, industry, rigid honesty, thrift, the thorough scouring of wooden and copper utensils, the hoarding of coin likely to disappear from the currency, the production of first rate commodities for market, the general preference for whatever is home-made.

*Silas Marner*

*Adam Bede* and *The Mill on the Floss* were novels filled with their author's direct experience. Her father and mother, her own childhood, the aspirations of her youth, her relationships with her brother, her devotion to Miss Lewis provided a good deal of the material, translated, of course, since she was always a novelist, into fiction. In her three last novels she was to move further away from immediate experience and to create in the truth of that experience different worlds. Between the early novels and the later ones came two interim books, very different from each other, both marking an extension of imagination. They were *Silas Marner*, and her only historical novel, *Romola*.

*Silas Marner*, the shortest and in form the most perfect of all George Eliot's novels, is really a fairy tale expressed in everyday village life. As in so many fairy tales, the focal point is gold, the gold which Marner, the old, epileptic weaver hoards under the stone in his cottage, and which is stolen from him by Dunstan Cass, the Squire's dissolute son. On Christmas Eve, the very season of magic gifts, while the whole neighbourhood is dancing and feasting at the Squire's house, the solitary, half-blind weaver, recovering from one of his fits, sees something on the stone floor of his cottage which may be his lost gold come back to him. Still partly dazed from the epileptic attack, he puts out his hand and touches the living gold of a child's hair. There follows the redemption by love. Silas, whose feelings have atrophied while his only object was to make money and spend it, now begins a new life as the father of an adopted child.

The child is the link with the other half of the story, the fortunes of the Cass family. Dunstan's bones whiten undiscovered in the Stone Pit. Godfrey is set free on that Christmas Eve to court and marry Nancy Lammeter, free from the burden of a young man's rash marriage, for the child who wandered into Silas Marner's hut had not come

there alone, but had tottered toward the light of his fire from the side of a woman who was found lying dead at his doorway in the snow.

*Silas Marner* is so complete a work of art that the reader feels no incongruity between the romantic tale and its realistic setting. Is it probable that even a near sighted man would mistake gold hair for gold coins ? It does not much matter. This most charming of George Eliot's novels has the quality of a legend, the kind of story that would be handed down in the village for years afterwards. It is the perfect Christmas story. The conversation of the men in the Rainbow Inn has often been admired for its veracity and liveliness. The weaknesses of the two Cass brothers are admirably described. Nancy Lammeter is another of those young women whose prettiness George Eliot conveys so vividly. She who had no doubt suffered a good deal from believing herself ugly, had an acute sense of feminine beauty. There is a fairy tale quality again in the preparations for the party in the Squire's house, the dresses of silvery twilled silk lifted from the clean, rustling paper, the necklace of coral clasped round Miss Nancy's white neck. It is not a fairy tale that ends in complete happiness all round, for Godfrey has to continue to suffer his childlessness, the penalty for distrusting Nancy's generosity, and for disowning his child for eighteen years. Perhaps *Silas Marner* is the best introduction to George Eliot, certainly for a young reader, and it is the most shapely of all her novels.

### *Romola*

*Silas Marner*, for all its real picture of village life, is an excursion into fantasy. *Romola*, also a spring away from memories of George Eliot's youth, goes to a world which she could only know from books, and by the patient reconstruction of a learned and historically conscious traveller. It is a full, elaborately documented story of Florence in the time of Savonarola. 'It is', says Doctor Leavis, 'the work

of a gifted mind but of a mind misusing itself.' To most of her admirers it is the least readable of all her novels. The characters, weighed down by their historical trappings, too deliberately and carefully established in their period, move heavily, and have much less vitality than her men and women of the English midlands. George Eliot put more work into *Romola* than into any other novel. She herself said that she began the book a young woman, and finished it an old one.

Romola, the noble and beautiful Florentine girl, is, like Maggie Tulliver, a self portrait, in some ways more like her author, for she is the only one of her notable women to whom George Eliot attempted to give her own intellectual equipment. Tito, the Greek, who marries Romola and afterwards turns against her, is another and meaner version of Arthur Donnithorne. He has deceived Tessa, an ignorant young *contadina*, with a ceremony of mock marriage, and she innocently believes the children whom she bears him to be legitimate, one day to be publicly acknowledged by their father, whose secret appearances and disappearances she hardly dreams of questioning. When Tito has succumbed to the avenger, who has been dogging him throughout the book, Romola, who has no child, takes in Tessa and the children and shelters them. The story is played out against the full historical background, the arrival of the French under Charles VIII, the struggle between the followers of the Medici and the popular party, the trial and execution of Savonorola.

Perhaps one of the things that make *Romola* so much less lively and readable than George Eliot's other novels is that she is denying herself the use of one of her greatest gifts, her use of ordinary conversation. Her men and women of the English midlands live by the pungency and vitality of their speech, whereas Romola and Tito use a carefully manufactured dialogue, meant to represent the speech of their time. Yet even though many admirers of George Eliot find *Romola* difficult to read and have no desire to re-read it, it is

still recognizably the work of a great novelist, in scope and breadth, and in humanity and compassion.

*Felix Holt*

Sometimes a book on which the writer spends great care and labour with only partly successful results acts as a spring-board for the imagination. Certainly after *Romola* George Eliot wrote her three greatest novels. It may be that the historical perspective of *Romola* turned her mind towards the history of her own time. *Felix Holt* is a political novel although the politics are not the best part of it. It is an uneven book, the plot is involved, depending on legal complications in the inheritance of the Transome estate. The legal business is both tedious and unconvincing, there is something of an outworn tradition in all the farrago of the missing heir, and the interloper turned out. There is a lively and vigorous picture of an election in a country town, but the great strength of the novel lies in the emotional drama of the Transome family.

Mrs. Transome, hardened by her unhappy secret; Harold Transome with his carefully planned life, and his always realizable ambitions, his good-tempered selfishness; Jermyn, the coarse-fibred rascal, who is also a good and affectionate husband and father, misusing his trust for the welfare of his family—all these are drawn with the hand of a master. We are skilfully and gradually made aware of the likeness between Harold and Jermyn. The commonplace egotism of Jermyn, tempered by Mrs. Transome's keen-edged personality, becomes in their son a hardness veiled by natural geniality. All that is greedy and unprincipled in Jermyn is also greedy and unprincipled in the son, although a different nurture and a wider experience have put a finer glaze on the surface. Mrs. Transome, the bitter old woman, realizes that she will get no more real tenderness from her son than from her former lover. Her tragedy is not only that she has implicated both with herself in an impossible situation, but that she is necessary to neither.

Felix Holt is meant to be the foil to Harold and Jermyn. He is the idealized 'working man' of his time, the high-principled reformer who cares nothing for personal advantage and is willing to give his life to the cause of the oppressed. He is determined not to rise out of his own class, but to remain in it as a manual worker and to devote his spare energies to educating the children of his fellow workers. George Eliot was no revolutionary in politics. A gradual improvement in conditions and nurture was her idea of a revolution. She had nothing like the inside knowledge of the hardships of poverty that Mrs. Gaskell showed in *Mary Barton*. Perhaps the reason was that the poor whom she really knew were all country people, and poverty is always less bearable in a city. Felix Holt remains an embodiment of an idea, and an idea perceived intellectually from outside, rather than a living person. He is most alive in his relationship with the lovely, lively Esther Lyon. The early scenes between the two when they are falling reluctantly in love and want to conceal it from themselves by sparring are very good indeed. Esther softens into love and tenderness, and although she appreciates luxury and position, and is delighted to find herself able to be at home in the Transome world, she throws it all away for Felix's sake.

As always the novel is remarkable not only for the main theme, but for the humour and veracity of the minor characters. No English novelist, not Dickens himself, is more at home in the public house and the market place. Some of the characters recall those of the earlier novels, Rufus Lyon is again, like Dinah Morris and Mr. Tryan, the saintly evangelical, Felix Holt's grumbling but devoted mother recalls Lizbeth Bede, but Esther is no longer a heroine drawn from her author's own self portrait, and Mrs. Transome, Harold, and Jermyn are genuine creations. There is nothing in George Eliot's work more powerful than the tragedy of Mrs. Transome, the destiny whose seed was sown so long ago is worked out in the course of the

novel with the inevitability of a Greek drama. *Felix Holt* is not one of the best-known or most widely read of George Eliot's novels, probably because the political novel is not popular with English readers, but it is certainly one of the most worth reading.

*Middlemarch*

*Middlemarch* is now generally recognized, not only as the full flower of George Eliot's genius, but as one of the finest novels in the English language. Its subtitle is *A Study of Provincial Life*. Its scene is a country town in the Midlands, and the big houses around the town. Its theme, as Gerald Bullett has said in his recent book on George Eliot, is ' the diversity of provincial manners and the significance of ordinary lives '.

Its several strands are connected by the slight and apparently casual threads which link up human lives. As in nearly every great novel, there is more than one story. There is the story of Dorothea Brooke, an ardent girl, unsatisfied by the idle country-house life in which she has been brought up. Like Maggie Tulliver, like the young Mary Ann Evans, she is conscious of powers yearning for development, and of an intensity that sets her apart from the household in which she lives, even from her sister, Celia, the natural young woman, who is half afraid of Dorothea's superiority, and half amused at ' Dodo's notions '. It is inevitable that Celia, whose lighter personality has matured earlier, should marry the robust and conventional Sir James Chettam, while Dorothea marries the elderly scholar, Casaubon. She dreams of devoting her life to helping him with his work, only to discover that this great work is an occupation that offers him a retreat from life, a dreary hotch-potch of other men's ideas, endlessly compiled for a book that will never be written and could have no value if it were. Apart from the disillusionment about Casaubon's work, Dorothea suffers the natural disappointment of a vigorous young woman married to a man prematurely old in whom feeling

has long since atrophied, although he has enough jealousy to see before Dorothea is aware of it the dawning love between her and his cousin, the artist, Will Ladislaw.

Ladislaw is one of the links with the story of Lydgate, the young doctor who comes to Middlemarch full of faith in himself and in the work, scientific and practical, that he means to do. He is a parallel to Dorothea, for he too marries somebody who is the negation to all his aspirations. Rosamund Vincy, the daughter of a comfortable, unpretentious family, has been educated out of homeliness and into gentility. Completely self centred, she is hardly aware of Lydgate as a person ; she sees him as an opportunity of climbing out of the tradesmen's world in which she was born into professional and county society. Her values are incomprehensible to him as his are to her, but her blinkered obstinacy prevails, and his ambitions are caught up in a net of debts incurred to satisfy his wife's idea of happiness. He loses the fine edge of his integrity, and incurs suspicion of deep disgrace from which he is never wholly cleared except in the opinion of his nearest friends. He leaves Middlemarch to make what life he can, a successful one, since he is an able man, but with an incompatible wife, and disappointed hopes.

It is easier to sympathize with him in his tragic self-betrayal than with Bulstrode, whose ostentatious virtue and high reputation in Middlemarch is based on a shabby fraud at the expense of a widow and her child. Yet Bulstrode, because he is handled with profound compassion, moves the reader. One of the most poignant passages in the book is the account of his wife's discovery that the husband whom she has always revered has cheated over his first wife's estate, and that his disgrace is known in Middlemarch. It is the end of all her happiness and pride. Obeying an instinct which she cannot articulate, she lingers in her bedroom, taking off her ornaments and changing her elaborate hairdressing for a plain one, putting on a black dress, mourning for the life of respect and importance she has shared

with him. Going downstairs at last she sees him in his chair, looking withered and shrunken. She puts a hand on his shoulder, saying gently, 'Look up, Nicholas' so that he bursts into tears and without question or answer they weep side by side.

George Eliot's novels have abounded in the saints of the Evangelical Movement, but in Bulstrode she presents another of the characters whom the Movement seemed to foster, the man who combines a steady and not always scrupulous pursuit of profit and success with a religion which is always on his lips but in a separate compartment of his heart. 'It was a principle with Mr. Bulstrode to gain as much power as possible that he might use it for the glory of God. He went through a great deal of spiritual conflict and inward argument in order to adjust his motives and make clear to himself what God's glory required.'

In contrast to Lydgate and Bulstrode, the man of unshakable integrity is Caleb Garth, the land agent, another version of George Eliot's father, an older and more human Adam Bede; his daughter, Mary, in her sturdy sense and loyalty is the one hope of stability for Fred Vincy, spoiled like his sister Rosamund, but not ruined, because unlike her he has a warm heart. Fred has been nearly destroyed by vain expectations. Another plot, which might almost be the plot of a detective novel, is focused on Stone Court, where the rich old Featherstone lies dying, watched faithfully by Mary Garth, and hungrily by all those who could hope to benefit by his death.

All these strands are woven into a pattern of that varied scene of provincial life which George Eliot knew so much better than any other woman writer of her century, for she was at home in the billiard room of the public house, in the Rectory parlour, at the committee meeting, and in the drawing room of the country house. Dorothea Brooke is a woman, like her creator, of exceptional quality, but everyone else in the book is of average stature. They are people of moderate gifts and mixed faults and virtues, to whom

George Eliot has given significance by her respect for them as human beings and by her profound sympathy and compassion. Even when she is writing of how Rosamund Vincy's shallow egotism destroys her husband, she sees the disappointing marriage, too, through Rosamund's eyes, and shows that she, too, in her limited way, is a feeling and suffering human being. Fred Vincy is an unsatisfactory young scapegrace to such judges as Mrs. Garth and his father, but how sympathetically, and also with what humour, George Eliot draws his own young impatience with the people who grudge him a bit of fun, and are for ever ' at him ' about the serious purposes of life.

Deeply concerned, like all George Eliot's novels, with the serious purposes of life, *Middlemarch* is also enlivened all the time by humour. It is the funniest of all her books. Even Dorothea, with whom she obviously identifies herself, she sees sometimes through the amused eyes of Celia.

Occasionally the humour fails, as in some of the scenes between Dorothea and Will Ladislaw, the only character in the book who never for an instant comes to life, but everywhere it provides the savour in this long sober chronicle of ordinary life, which leaves the reader with the conviction that lives after all are never ordinary when presented by an author who feels them deeply and can discern at least a part of their pattern.

*Daniel Deronda*

Gerald Bullett, the author of the most recent English biography of George Eliot, says of *Daniel Deronda* that ' It gives us between one pair of covers the best and worst of her work '. Dr. Leavis, who in his book *The Great Tradition* places George Eliot among the four writers who have best maintained the English tradition of the novel, is of the opinion that *Daniel Deronda* should be divided into two, and the best of it, the story of Gwendolen Harleth, published as a separate novel. This is an extreme form of criticism, and it would be difficult for any living writer to take such a

liberty with a masterpiece he is not likely to equal. The two stories of Gwendolen and of Daniel Deronda run side by side and are closely interwoven. They represent the two halves of George Eliot, the inspired novelist and the dogmatic moralist. In this, her last novel, both reach their full development.

The link between the fortunes of Gwendolen and Deronda is forged in the dramatic opening scene, when Deronda, standing idly in the Casino at a French watering place, is attracted by a beautiful girl at one of the tables, who stakes and loses. Next morning he happens to see her going into a pawn shop, follows her and buys the turquoise bracelet which she has just sold, returning it to her with a little note of reproach. This incident makes him from the beginning a mentor in her mind, someone whose approval she craves but is not likely to win.

Daniel is the adopted son of an English country gentleman, Sir Hugo Mallinger. He knows nothing of his parentage : he has always supposed himself to be Sir Hugo's natural son.

Gwendolen is gambling to make money for the journey home to Offendeen, where her mother and half-sisters are facing ruin owing to the failure of their investments. She is at a crisis in her life. She fled abroad to escape an offer of marriage from Grandcourt, the great man of the neighbourhood. She had wanted the match although she did not love him, but she had discovered at the last minute that he already had three children by a woman who was expecting him to make her his wife.

When she comes back again to the choice between this splendid marriage, which she feels with all her moral sense to be wrong, or to work as a governess, she agrees to marry him. Spoiled and accustomed to bending mother and sisters to her every whim, she believes that she will manage Grandcourt, but soon discovers that he is too much for her young egotism and inexperience. In her miserable marriage, she turns for comfort to Deronda. Grandcourt perceives,

though she does not, that she is in love with Deronda, who although interested and compassionate, is not in love with her. His life is moving in another direction, towards Mirah, a lovely young Jewess whom he prevents from committing suicide, towards her brother, Ezra, a consumptive Jew of great character and emotional power, whose hopes are set on the restoration of his race to Palestine. The discovery that Deronda is not Sir Hugo's son but the son of a distinguished Jew binds him for ever to Mirah and to his own people.

While Gwendolen and Grandcourt are abroad on a miserable holiday in which she is suffering the full extent of his cold sadism, they go out sailing and Grandcourt is drowned before her eyes. To Deronda, the only person at hand to help her, she cries, ' I saw my wish outside me '. Deronda's marriage to Mirah leaves her desolate, her only hope that she may in time come to be the kind of person whom Deronda admires, and believes her capable of being.

Nothing that George Eliot wrote is more powerful than this study of Gwendolen Harleth. The change from the wilful glowing girl dominating her own surroundings so easily to the subdued wife in the grip of a man of hardened selfishness is superb. Gwendolen's tragedy moves inevitably towards its lonely end. George Eliot does not attempt to disguise her murderous feelings towards her husband, and that cry ' I saw my wish outside me ' really foreshadows the whole of the changed attitude towards human nature that distinguishes the fiction of this century from the last.

How skilful, too, is the description of Gwendolen's yearning for Deronda, the love that first comes to her under the disguise of moral dependance. Deronda is admirable in all his scenes with Gwendolen. It is in the other half of his story that the moralizing, uncritical, and sentimental side of George Eliot comes into full play. Once again, in her desire to make her good people good and to plead the cause of the exiled Jewish race, George Eliot has failed to make her characters human. Goodness is far more vitally represented

by the musician, Klesmer, and by Catherine Arrowpoint. The scene in which he declares his love for Catherine is an admirable foil to Grandcourt's cold and mannered proposal and Gwendolen's calculating acceptance.

*Daniel Deronda* is the only one of George Eliot's novels which does not draw upon her knowledge of farm, village, and small-town life. Its scene is laid in country houses, in London, or abroad. Its strength lies in the presentation at a deep level of truth about human nature; its weakness creeps in when George Eliot allows herself to make the truth what she would like it to be. Yet the two halves of the story are necessary for contrast, and if Ezra Cohen is that saintly evangelical, whom she cannot deny herself in another form, Gwendolen is a magnificent portrait. In scope, in power, in awareness of truth, *Daniel Deronda*, although uneven, is a great novel, one which combines the modern novelist's sense of the complexity of motive and character with the fullness and richness of Victorian fiction.

### *Conclusion*

*Daniel Deronda* was George Eliot's last novel. It is by her novels alone that she lives. She wrote a number of short stories, of which the most remarkable is *The Lifted Veil*, a good deal of pedestrian poetry, including a long dramatic poem, *The Spanish Gypsy*, and a book of satirical essays called *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*. All her work was written during the twenty-three years of her life with George Lewes. In 1878, two years after the publication of *Daniel Deronda*, Lewes died.

It was a mortal blow to George Eliot, who lived only two years after him. The end of her story is a strange one. For weeks after Lewes's death she shut herself up and remained in a stupor of despair, seeing no one. The first friend she did care to see was John Walter Cross, the son of a London merchant, one of the many intelligent young men who had frequented the house near Regent's Park. Cross was at that time thirty-nine and George Eliot sixty. He

had just lost his mother, to whom he was devoted, and no doubt he turned unconsciously to George Eliot to fill her place, as she turned to him in a desperate search for comfort. They were constantly together, and on 6 May 1880 they were married.

George Eliot called the astonishing marriage ' a blessing falling to me beyond my share '. It has been conjectured that it was a relief to her conscience to find herself at last a married woman. It seems more likely that she, for whom George Lewes's love had been life itself, was snatching desperately at any comfort to relieve the agony of loneliness and deprivation. There was no time to see how the strange marriage would work. Cross seems to have been devoted to Marian. After her death he compiled the first biography from her letters and journals. No doubt his affection and his company gave Marian some comfort. Her nature was deeply loving and it had become a necessity to her to have someone to love, and to be protected and cherished. But the loss of Lewes had been a blow too deep for recovery. In December 1880, six months after her marriage, she died.

## *George Eliot*

In a review of *Felix Holt*, published soon after its appearance, Henry James summed up George Eliot's work. He spoke of her, ' closely wedded talents and foibles ', and said that

> her plots are artificial and her conclusions weak. In compensation for these defects, we have the broad array of rich accomplishments. First the firm and elaborate delineation of individual character. Then that extension of human sympathy, that easy understanding of character at large. That familiarity with man from which a novelist draws his real inspiration, to which he owes it that, firm locked in the most rigid prose, he is still more or less a poet. George Eliot's humanity colours all her other gifts.

She was not a writer who in her lifetime had to struggle for recognition. From the publication of her first book, she was acknowledged by her peers, and these included Dickens and Thackeray. Her career was one of unbroken success, and in spite of her moods of diffidence and self distrust, she knew herself to be an important novelist.

After her death her reputation seemed for a time to be obscured. No one really interested in the English novel could ignore her, but many people who did not read her had an idea of her as a governessy blue-stocking, a turgid, out-of-date Victorian. Lately a more general interest in her work has revived, and the sound and affectionate studies by Gerald Bullett and by Joan Bennett, as well as Dr. Leavis's critical estimate, have stimulated a more just appreciation of her superb gifts.

It is now nearly a hundred years since the publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life*. During that time a change has taken place in the attitude of both novelists and their readers to the characters in a novel. To say that moral judgement in the novelist and in the reader has disappeared would be an exaggeration, for there is no one civilized enough to read a book, who has not some moral standard to which he expects himself, and still more other people to conform, and even if he does not know it, he applies this in fiction as in life. Moreover those standards, in Western civilization, are impregnated with the Christian tradition, and with values accepted over hundreds of years. But moral judgement, although nearly always there, is in the background, often unacknowledged, and it depends far more now on individual taste in life and less on agreed standards.

What has very nearly departed from the novel and from the reader of the novel, is moral concern. The modern novelist wishes to present a picture of life from some angle. The reader wishes to see what that particular facet of life is like. He does not feel distressed if the characters in a novel behave badly. His great interest is to see how and why they behave badly. On the whole neither the writer nor

the reader feel moral concern for the characters, they feel a more objective interest. Moral concern for her characters was the very essence of George Eliot. 'Is he, or she, going to manage to be noble or not?' is the real plot of her novels. Sometimes her ideas of nobility are unacceptable to the modern reader, who has learnt that unselfishness can be a neurosis, and sometimes forgets that it can also be love, who is more afraid of priggishness than of homicide, insanity, or perversion. But the choice between living by one's own best or second best values is still universal. It is the urgency of that choice that creates the tension in George Eliot's work, and without tension there is no great novel.

There is no doubt whatever that George Eliot is a great novelist. Her awareness of life is both wide and deep. She is one of the most intellectual of English novelists, but with her intellectual power goes no tinge of contempt, nothing that dries up her sympathy with average men and women. She uses a mind nourished by philosophy and learning to express the significance of ordinary lives. With that 'firm and elaborate delineation of individual character' of which Henry James spoke, is combined a genius for bringing each character to life, not only as an individual but as part of the social pattern. Her vision is whole. For her there is no division between the inner and outer life, between the profound emotion, the agonizing spiritual conflict, and the bargain in the lawyer's office, the election brawl, the gossip in farm kitchen or tap room. All is unified by her deep-rooted love of humanity. Beneath all her faithful and often humorous rendering of its meannesses and absurdities lies her sense of its potential grandeur.

She is vividly aware of its humour. Infinitely pompous and solemn in her private correspondence, she shows in all her novels the shrewd and racy humour of an old countrywoman, which only breaks down when she is handling one of her idealized characters or one of those too closely identified with herself. Her dialogue is nearly always masterly. The tirades of her vigorous older women, the talk

of men idling or working together, have the veracity of simple poetry, and reveal the nature of the speakers more effectively than any description.

George Eliot's particular contribution to the English novel is that she left it aware of character on a very much deeper level. Her analysis of motive is penetrating, and she has more understanding than any English novelist writing before Freud of the undercurrents of mind and heart. Because her human beings are more complicated and more mixed than those of the novelists who preceded her, they are nearer to the truth of human nature. This penetration is not only of the intellect, it is born of a harmony between mind and feeling, illuminated by compassion and love for humanity. In her best work there is a depth and reality that no English novelist has surpassed, nor can any of them surpass her in her power of taking the reader into her created world.

# GEORGE ELIOT
# A
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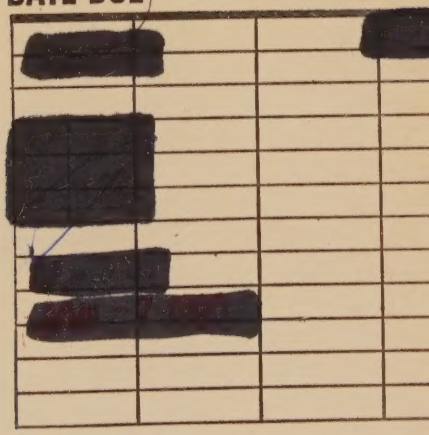

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